

The Will of Thomas Midhaste, Essex Freemason, dated 1616.

Some time ago at the Essex Records Office ^[1], the Will of Thomas Midhaste, of St. Osyth, Essex, (Operative) Freemason and dated 26th April 1616, came to light. It is written in Secretary Hand on one side of a sheet of paper measuring 15 3/4 inches(275mm) x 10 3/4inches(400mm) wide. It was transcribed by Eve McLaughlin ^[2]. Searches and additional information relating to Thomas and St. Osyth were provided by Miss P. Hendy ^[3]. Although the English word 'Freemason' was used from early times in official documents, the use of the word 'freemason' to describe his occupation, make this Will one of the earliest private and personal documents to use the word and it is on this that the importance, or otherwise, of this document rests.

“In the name of god Amen, I Thomas Midhaste of St Oseth in the countie of Essex freemason, being of good minde and remembrance, god be thanked therefore but sick in bodye do make and ordaine this my last will and testament the 26th daye of Aprill the 14th year of King James king of England, Frances and Ireland and the 49th of Scotland, revoking and calling back all previous wills whatsoever heretofore made. First I yealde and begethe my soule to Almightye god my creator and to Jhesus Christ his sonne my onlye redeemer and saviour by and through whose death blood(s)heding I do hope and trust to be saved and my body to be buried in the p(ar)ishe churchyard of St Oseth aforesaid. to Joane my wife the howse or tenement in North Street in my owne tenure and occupation with all and every th'app(ur)t(enance)s there unto now belonging, late Henrie Bassetes, provided that should it happen that my wife be now with childe then my wille is that my said child or children yet unborne shall have my sd howse after the decease of the said joane to my child/ren yet unborne and their heirs lawful of the body begotten. If she is not with child, then the howse etc shall remayne to Marie Hunte daughter of Edward Hunte and her heirs lawfullybegotten for ever.

To John Midhaste my brother 5s of good and lawful money of England to be paid him when he shall lawfully demand it. To John Wodde my apprentice all my working tools to be delivered to him in one moneth of my decease and to the said john Wodde my suit of ap(ar)ell now upon my back to be delivered in one moneth ...

Item all the rest of my goods and chattells unbequethed my debts beinge paid and my funeralls discharged I give and bequethe unto Joane my wife, whom I make and ordaine my executrix for the p(er)formance of this my last will and testament. In witness whereof I have set my hand and seal

date the day and year above written

his m (?mark)

Thos Midhaste

& seal witnesses not legible on copy “

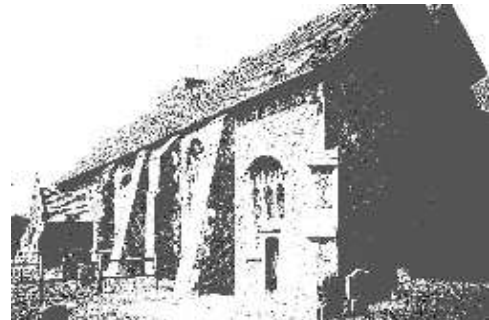
Unfortunately, no trace of Thomas, or any of the other people named in the Will, can be found in the records at St. Osyth or in the obvious places searched on the Internet. Indeed, the booklet on St. Osyth produced by 'English Heritage' ^[4], makes the discouraging point that “The town appears to be poorly documented as little local medieval source material appears to have survived the suppression of St. Osyth Abbey.” They go on to say “... The main sources available are the court rolls etc. of the manor of St, Osyth which survive from 1669 onward.” Maps are limited to three estate maps of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The early use of the word 'freemason' in English occurred in 1376 where in London Letter books, four representatives of the stonemasons were nominated to the council and described as 'freemason' although this was struck through and replaced with 'masons'. There is an earlier reference in 1325 when one of those who assisted in the escape of men from Newgate Prison was known as Nicholas le Freemason.^[5] However, these are 'official' documents and not private and personal documents as is Thomas Midhaste's Will.

Freemasons were a specialist group of Masons who carved in Free-Stone, a fine sand or limestone. In the 1351 Statute of Labour, which was intended to limit wages which had risen due to the shortage of labour following the Black Death, wages were set at "... and master free-stone mason 4 d. and other masons 3 d. and their servants 1 d. ob.; tilers 3 d." thus Thomas Midhaste claimed to be of that superior class of Mason, a carver in free stone and may well have carried out maintenance or restoration work on the many effigies adorning the Church and Priory both having their origins in the 13th century and both magnificent buildings which could have kept Thomas employed for many years.

Thomas gives his address as 'North Street'. There has never been a 'North Street' in St. Osyth so it is possible that Thomas was not living in St. Osyth when the Will was written and, due to the cost of transferring his body across Country borders, his wish to be buried in the churchyard at St. Osyth's may not have been realized. However, in that period, say 'The Street' may have been locally known as 'North Street' because it was to the North of some feature in the village although the local name would not have been entered on any map or in any local document. It is curious that the date of the Will was firmly established but the town or village was not mentioned implying that it would be obvious to the reader of the Will. The only 'obvious' place would be St. Osyth.

The Church of St. Peter and St. Paul is the church referred to in Thomas's Will and has been Anglican since 1539. It is situated in the centre of the town and, in appearance, virtually the same now as it was then. As it has always been the parish church we can surely conclude that Thomas was a member of the Church of England'.



Although Thomas could not write and thus made his 'mark' on the Will, he was a man of some substance. The gift of 5 shillings to his brother John and his working tools and clothes to his apprentice John Wodde were of significant value. He must have made a good living from his employment as a Freemason and had sufficient work to warrant the employment of an apprentice.

James became King of Scotland in 1567 and succeeded to the throne of England in 1603 following the death of Elizabeth I. By mentioning 14th and 49th year of reign, the Will is firmly dated 26th of April 1616/7.

In 1616, Thomas and his wife had no children but, although Thomas was, as he said, 'sick of bodye', he still thought he may father a child before he died and his wife Joane was of child bearing age and he may have had reason to think that she was already pregnant when the Will was written.

St. Osyth, declared a royal port in the 13th century, was a very important town with a Quay dating from medieval times. Trade was centred on the Priory with goods going to London mainly by barge. Because of the trade carried out through St. Osyth, those living in the town,

including our Thomas, would have been well aware of events occurring in Essex and in London. Thomas would surely have known about the Catholic Gunpowder Plot (1605) and Court intrigues and his life may well have been affected by the paranoia of the King and his distrust of Parliament.

No. 8 Spring Road in St. Osyth was identified as a former Guildhall during conversion in 2004. It has been dated at 1525 or earlier and probably existed during the time Thomas was in St. Osyth. As an important craftsman in the town he would undoubtedly have made frequent visits to the Guildhall.

If anyone can contribute further to the understanding of this will, I would be pleased to hear from you.

Alec Hall.

Acknowledgements.

- [1] Source document: ERO Ref:D/ABW 26/267
- [2] Transcribed by Eve McLaughlin. Genealogist and author of book on 17th Century writing.
- [3] Information from Miss.P. Hendy, Local History Recorder for St. Osyth.
- [4] Historic Towns of Essex ~ St. Osyth ~ English Heritage. Essex County Council.
- [5] "The Earliest use of the word 'Freemason'. Paper by Andrew Prescott, Sheffield University.